

[William Donald Mitchell]

SOUTH CAROLINA WRITERS' PROJECT

Life History

Title: William Donald Mitchell [??]

Date of first writing: Feb. 22, 1939.

Name of person interviewed: William Donald Mitchell (white)

Fictitious name: "Mitch."

Street address: Central fire station.

Place: Spartanburg, S.C.

Occupation: Fireman.

Name of writer: D. A. Russell.

Name of reviser:

William Donald Mitchell, 72 years old, is not only the oldest city fire fighter, both in years and in service, but he also is the oldest city employee in point of service now employed. For forty-two years he has been a fireman, and for twenty-eight of those forty-two years, he served as chief of the Spartanburg fire department. He was the first paid fireman employed by the town, in 1897.

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As he reviewed the panorama of his years in the fire department, this veteran fire fighter recalled that when he was elected to the department on Sept. 20, 1897, during the administration of Mayor Arch B. Calvert, at a salary of \$30.00 per month, there were only two pieces of apparatus—a hose and chemical wagon drawn by two horses, and a steam engine. Moses Greenewald was chief of the department, receiving \$100.00 yearly. Bob Wilder was employed as a city fireman after Mitchell, and later Will Salder, a negro, was employed.

“The first fire station was a one-story frame building, with a dirt floor, which was located east of the present city hall,” said the veteran fireman. [??????]

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“There were two stalls for the horses. When there was a fire the bell in the opera house was sounded, the number of rings signifying which ward the fire was in. Only the hose wagon would respond, but if the fire was a large one, and the steamer was needed, the horses were unhitched from the hose wagon, brought back to the station, hitched to the steam engine, and was started to the scene of the fire. Strips of bacon were used to start the fire in the engine as it left the station, and by the time it reached the blase, the pumper was red hot.

“There were no paved streets then, nor any electric lights. Most of the time, or rather, a great deal of the time, we had to go to fire in mud ankle deep. We got to a fire the best we could, and sometimes we arrived too late to do much good other than to keep a fire from spreading to other houses or buildings. We had to depend on the volunteers to respond to every fire alarm.”

Mr. Mitchell, referred to as “chief” and “Mitch” by those on the department, was born on Sept. 15, 1866, in Fairview township, Greenville County, the son of John Mitchell and Mattie Donald Mitchell. His father was a farmer, but during the War Between the States, was superintendent of a yarn mill at Cedar Falls.

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He was married to Effie Johnson, of Statesville, North Carolina, in 1916, and she died in [1926?]. He has three children, a daughter and two sons. Shortly following the death of his wife, Mr. Mitchell sold his home on Walker Street, and has been living at the central fire station since.

During his lifetime he has had but two weeks schooling, this being at the Fairview school when he was ten years old. His mother died when he was eleven years old, and shortly thereafter he went to live with his grandfather and work on the farm, staying with his grandfather until his death. Mitchell 17 years old then.

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"I hired out them to Lewis Thompson, in Greenville County, for \$8.00 a month and board," said Mr. Mitchell. "I stayed with him for about four years and then decided to farm for myself. I averaged around 200 bushels of corn and eight bales of cotton during the year. I soon learned to buy and sell horses, and in 1894 decided to come to Spartanburg and started to work for Finch Alexander, who was running a livery stable. I helped to run the business, and bought and sold horses for him. My salary was \$10.00 per month and board. I also received a small commission on the selling of horses or mules. I was with him for three years, or until I was elected a fireman in 1897."

The veteran fire fighter has served during the administration of six mayors, these being Arch Calvert, John F. Floyd, Boyce Lee, O. L. Johnson, Ben Hill Brown, and the present mayor, T. W. Woodworth.

On April 23, 1906, he was elected as assistant chief of the fire department, and on Sept. 11, 1911, he was elected chief of the department, succeeding Chief E.S. Kennedy, who resigned. On the same date D. H. Huntsinger was elected assistant chief of the department. He was succeeded as chief of the department in 1933 by L. T. [Cothran?], at present commissioner of the fire department on city council. His salary as chief of the department was \$196.00 per month. His present salary is that of a private, being \$130.00.

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"We had about sixty volunteer fireman and four paid members when I joined the department," said Mr. Mitchell. "There were three volunteer companies, "The Champions," "The Reds," and "The Bonnie Blue," The last named being a negro company. Chief Greenewald did not live at the department, but stayed at his home. Bob Wilder, myself and the negro, Will Salder, stayed at the fire house day and night. We were on for twenty-four hours, 4 and were given a half a night off once a month. Today we have two stations being used, and a third that abandoned in 1931. There are eight pieces of motorized apparatus, an up-to-date fire alarm system, and thirty-seven men, who work on twelve-hour shifts. When station No. 2 was discontinued, that put eight men out of work."

Mr. Mitchell recalled that the largest fire in the history of the department occurred in 1905 when fifty-nine houses were destroyed in the Spartan Mill community. Inadequate water supply, coupled with/ the fact that it was a windy day, made the conflagration all the worse, and all the firemen and volunteers could do was to prevent it from spreading further.

The most significant date in the history of the Spartanburg fire department, in the opinion of Mr. Mitchell, was on Feb. 8, 1909, when city council signed a contract for an electrical fire alarm system to be installed by the [Gameswell?] Fire Alarm Company. Thirty-five fire alarm boxes were installed at first, and gradually additional boxes have been placed until now there are seventy-nine located through out the city, which includes boxes installed at Wofford and Converse colleges.

It requires less than a minute for the apparatus to leave the fire station after an alarm has sounded, according to Mr. Mitchell. And, strange as it may seem, the firemen respond to an alarm quicker during the night hours than in the daytime. This is explained by the fact that at night, after the firemen have retired, and an alarm comes in, all they do is jump into their boots, slide down the pole and jump to their places on the apparatus and get started. This requires less than 30 seconds. In the day, however, the firemen may be scattered about the station, some doing other duties, and when an alarm comes, it may require a few seconds more 5 to get out, however, it has never required as long as a full minute

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before the trucks were leaving the station and on their way to the fire, according to Mr. Mitchell.

For the past six years Mr. Mitchell has been the switch board and telephone operator at the central station, and does not engage in fighting fires. It is his duty to see that the alarm, if sounded by the gong from one of the boxes, tallies with the indicator and the tape, and when the alarm is telephoned, to ascertain for sure the correct address from excited persons who, on many occasions, cannot give their own home address.

During the years that he has been a member of the department, the firemen have been called upon to perform many unusual requests, said Mr. Mitchell.

"I think one of the most unusual calls we ever received over the phone was when we raised a ladder to get a drunken man off the roof of a house on East Main Street about two years ago," said the former chief. "Also, there was the time about three years ago when a lady living in the Converse Heights section of the city locked herself in the bathroom, had a neighbor to call the fire department, and we went out and put a ladder up to the bathroom and she came out the window.

"About fifteen years ago we went out on Golden Street and pulled a mule out of a well thirty feet deep. First, we got a negro to go down into the well, tie a rope around the front legs of the animal and make a loop over his head to keep his head from under the water. We then pumped the well full of water and this floated the mule to the top. The animal belonged to Converse College.

"In 1930 we took the extension ladder to a location on East Main Street near Converse and got a woman tree-sitter from her perch in the top of a huge tree. She had been in the tree two days and nights, and a storm came up and she was afraid to climb back down the swaying tree.

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“Several years ago we also rescued a dog from a well on Wofford Street, and in 1927 pulled a frightened cat from a well an Seay Street. One request, however, that we did not fulfill, was the lady who called us a few months ago to send the apparatus to her home on Eydrick Street 'and smoke some rats out of her basement. But I suppose the most unique request we ever had, through all the years I have been a fireman, was about two months ago when some lady called over the 'big phone' and wanted to know if we would start a fire in her furnace at six o'clock sharp the next morning!”

Such is the life and experiences of a veteran fire fighter, and one who feels at home only when he is at the fire station.

“My time is almost at an end, I feel, but I do not want to have any lingering illness,” concluded Mr. Mitchell. “I hope to die in harness, just like old Jake did, when he and Joe were two of the best horses ever hitched to a fire wagon.”